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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BRUSSELS 001530

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/18/2015

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SUBJECT: CUBA: EU COMMISSIONER MICHEL BOLSTERS CUBAN FONMIN

REF: A. A) BRUSSELS 1389

[B](#). B) BRUSSELS 1217

[C](#). C) STATE 50857

Classified By: USEU POLOFF TOOD HUIZINGA, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: According to his adviser on Cuba, European Commissioner for Development Louis Michel believes the EU must bolster Cuban FM Felipe Perez Roque as the best hope for improved EU-Cuba relations. During his March 24-27 visit to the island (REFS B-C), Michel offered Perez Roque better relations with the EU, apparently implying that the EU wished to offset the U.S. embargo. Michel reportedly was struck by the "frozen" world-view of the other Cuban officials he met, including Castro, who appeared to believe Cuba's relationships with Venezuela and China rendered closer relations with the EU unnecessary. Michel's analysis of EU-Cuba relations seems unaffected by his meetings with the opposition. He believes the U.S. embargo soured the Communist experiment on the island, and that "constructive engagement" with Cuba is the EU's only alternative. His view has the upper hand in the EU, but continued Cuban intransigence could result in pressure to toughen EU policy by the time of the EU's June/July Cuba policy review. END SUMMARY.

A CONFIDENTIAL READOUT

[1](#)2. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX (STRICTLY PROTECT), who covers Cuba in the cabinet of European Commissioner for Development Louis Michel, called Poloff on April 14 for a "confidential" readout of Michel's March 24-27 visit to Cuba. XXXXXXXXXXXX accompanied Michel to the island and attended all of his meetings except the encounter with Castro. During his trip Michel met with Perez Roque, Vice President of the Council of State Carlos Lage, National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon, Minister of Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation Marta Lomas and, for three hours, with Fidel Castro. In addition, Michel met Cardinal Jaime Ortega and Cuban opposition figures Oswaldo Paya, Marta Beatriz Roque, Vladimiro Roca and the Women in White, a group of wives and family members of imprisoned dissidents. XXXXXXXXXXXX said he had offered the readout to assure Poloff that Michel fully shared the objective of democratic transition in Cuba and had reasons for his differences with the U.S. on tactics.

PEREZ ROQUE: THE GREAT HOPE

[1](#)3. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX repeated often that Perez Roque was the only Cuban official Michel met with whom it was possible to have a give-and-take discussion. Perez Roque appeared to be looking ahead to a post-Castro era, and thinking pragmatically about how to pursue Cuba's present and future interests. In this context, he listened with interest to Michel's suggestion that Cuba join the Cotonou Agreement and thereby establish a comprehensive basis for closer political, trade and development-assistance relations with the EU. (NOTE: The Cotonou Agreement is the framework for development-assistance, trade and political relations between the EU and the 79 members of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States. In exchange for a more favorable trade and aid relationship, Cotonou would commit Cuba to a regular political and human rights dialogue with the EU. END NOTE.) According to XXXXXXXXXXXX, Michel told Perez Roque that a Cotonou-based relationship with the EU could act as a counterbalance to Cuba's isolation from the U.S. He further suggested that, under Cotonou, the EU might be able to help the Cubans in sending medical doctors to countries in the region, as they are doing in Venezuela.

PEREZ ROQUE NONCOMMITTAL TO EU

[1](#)4. (C) Perez Roque's response to the Cotonou offer was noncommittal. XXXXXXXXXXXX said the Cuban FM's negotiating style could be described as "I'll tell you the time if you give me your watch." In that spirit, Perez Roque repeatedly told Michel the prerequisite for closer EU-Cuba ties was the EU's dropping support for the U.S. CHR resolution on Cuba. Denying that Michel had ever advocated dropping support, XXXXXXXXXXXX said that Michel's response was always that (1)

Cuba must release its imprisoned dissidents; and (2) since the CHR resolution was purely procedural, the EU could not fail to support it. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Michel raised the possibility of Cuba's inviting UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour or her Cuba Representative Christine Chanet to visit the island, in order to signal Cuba's desire to work with the international community. According to XXXXXXXXXXXX, Perez Roque said he would consider the idea but never followed up.

MICHEL'S EFFUSIVENESS WAS FOR PEREZ ROQUE

15. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX said Michel was quite aware that trying to buttress Perez Roque was a risk. No one could be sure whether he was acting in good faith in his contacts with the EU, or simply "the smartest" member of a completely intransigent regime. Nonetheless, Michel felt that Perez Roque represented the EU's only hope of influencing Cuba toward reform and respect for human rights. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Michel's effusive public optimism about EU-Cuba relations after the visit was meant to bolster Perez Roque. In reality, said XXXXXXXXXXXX, Michel came away sobered and distressed. Perez Roque would have to come through soon, said XXXXXXXXXXXX, by freeing more dissidents or allowing the UN human rights visit, or Michel and the Spaniards would no longer be able to advocate full constructive engagement. When pressed on whether "soon" meant before the upcoming June/July review of EU Cuba policy, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, "we'll probably have to give him more time than that."

MICHEL: CASTRO, OTHERS, DELUSIONAL

16. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX was at pains to contrast Perez Roque with the other Cuban officials they had met. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Michel was struck by how "frozen" and delusional Cuban officials' view of the world was. The meeting with Vice President of the Council of State Carlos Lage was emblematic of this, said XXXXXXXXXXXX. Lage seemed truly to believe that all was well on the island, that time was on Cuba's side regarding the U.S. embargo, that the Cuban peso revaluation would make the economy strong and, above all, that Cuba's growing relations with Venezuela and China rendered closer relations with the EU unnecessary. Although XXXXXXXXXXXX did not attend the meeting with Castro, Michel told him the three-hour encounter started with an almost surreal tour through a room Castro had showcasing Chinese products as if it were a museum exhibition. Castro, too, seemed fixated on Venezuela and China. Although the Alarcon meeting was less substantive, according to XXXXXXXXXXXX, Alarcon expressed views similar to Lage. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Minister of Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation Marta Lomas was the most wooden of all, sticking so close to her talking points that no exchange was possible.

MICHEL: EMBARGO FEEDS CUBAN DELUSIONS

17. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX stressed that a central element of the official Cubans' world-view was the U.S. embargo. The Cuban David had weathered the American Goliath's embargo for forty years, proving the regime's strength and lending it moral legitimacy. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Michel felt vindicated in his opposition to the embargo, since he had now witnessed the role it played in Cuban officials' delusions. XXXXXXXXXXXX added that Michel believed that Communism might have turned out well for Cuba if the embargo had not helped push the regime down the hard-line path. This was yet another reason, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, to choose a Cuba policy of engagement rather than isolation.

OPPOSITION: LITTLE EFFECT ON MICHEL'S VIEWS

18. (C) Michel's analysis of EU-Cuba relations seems unaffected by his meetings with the opposition and the Church. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Michel had three separate meetings with dissidents, one with Oswaldo Paya, another with Marta Beatriz Roque and Vladimiro Roca, and a third with the Women in White. XXXXXXXXXXXX said little of note was discussed during the Paya meeting, and that Roca was the only opposition figure who completely opposed the lifting of the EU measures. Beatriz Roque, said XXXXXXXXXXXX, opposed it as well, but was willing to wait and see what the upshot would be. The Women in White made a deep impression on Michel, according to XXXXXXXXXXXX, with their personal stories. However, they did not discuss policy. XXXXXXXXXXXX had little of substance to say about Michel's meeting with Cardinal Jaime Ortega.

MICHEL GOING TO MAT FOR FULL ENGAGEMENT

19. (C) COMMENT: Michel apparently will stop supporting full constructive engagement with Cuba only if Cuban intransigence -- and pressure from within the EU -- makes his position politically untenable. He is also willing to sell the EU approach to the Cubans as a counterweight to the U.S. embargo. Our sense is that this attitude, buttressed by Spanish support, is still carrying the day in the EU. (NOTE: On April 15, Perez Roque called EU support for the CHR resolution on Cuba "pathetic;" a Commission spokeswoman's response was to say that the EU supported the resolution because it did not condemn the Cuban authorities. END NOTE.) As the June/July review of EU Cuba policy approaches, the commitment of anti-Castro member states such as the Czech Republic and Poland, and, in Brussels, of the center-right activists in the European Parliament (REF A) will be key. If the Castro regime remains as uncompromising as it has been in its reaction to the CHR resolution, they might have a window of opportunity to modify the current policy of full engagement. END COMMENT.

SCHNABEL